INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRANSGENDER HEALTH
2021, VOL. 22, NOS. 1–2, 89–100
https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2020.1867396

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group



# Exploring trans people's experiences of adoption and fostering in the United Kingdom: A qualitative study

Claire Brown

School of Social Sciences, Humanities & Law, Teesside University, Middlesbrough, UK

**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Trans people's voices have routinely been silenced or subsumed within research on adoption or fostering by lesbian, gay and bisexual people. The lack of inclusion of trans people within adoption and fostering research and practice not only disadvantages trans carers, but also children needing foster and adoptive homes. The present paper addresses the need to bring the experiences of trans carers to the forefront of adoption and fostering research.

**Aims:** The study sought to explore the experiences of trans people in relation to adoption and fostering in the United Kingdom.

**Method:** A narrative inquiry was conducted using in-depth, semi-structured interviews and inductive thematic analysis to examine the subjective experiences of individuals who are trans or non-binary. Participants were recruited via purposive and snowballing sampling methods; using fliers sent via email to community groups and centres, social media and research network advertisement. People were eligible to take part if they were resident in the United Kingdom, over twenty-one years, and had adopted/fostered or applied/planned to apply to adopt or foster. Eight participants were included in this research, representing a variety of genders and ages.

**Results:** The thematic analysis resulted in the development of five themes: 1) Motivation to adopt or foster, 2) Perceived institutional barriers to pursuing adoption or fostering, 3) Experiences of cisgenderism in assessment, 4) Experiences of cisgenderism at placement, and 5) Positive experiences and recommendations.

**Discussion:** The findings highlighted the impact that cisgenderism can have in the context of adoption and fostering, whereby multiple barriers exist that impact trans and non-binary people interested in adoption and fostering. It is suggested that effective training should be implemented to increase understanding of gender diversity and address gender barriers in adoption and fostering social work.

**KEYWORDS**
Adoption; cisgenderism; fostering; non-binary; social work; transgender

## Introduction

Although there is now a solid research base focusing on lesbian and gay adopters and foster carers (e.g., Cosis-Brown et al., 2015; Golombok et al., 2014), the voices of trans people have rarely been included in research to date (Brown & Rogers, 2020). Evidence is lacking regarding the inclusion of trans people in adoption and fostering unless they are part of a same-gender group (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018; First4adoption, 2017). However, it is logical to suggest that the number of trans applicants is low compared with cisgender applicants (Brown & Rogers, 2020). Anecdotally, few trans people pursue adopting or fostering, and it is likely that most agencies have little experience of assessing and supporting trans adopters or foster carers (First4adoption, 2017). Hudson-Sharp's (2018) scoping review of child and family social workers' knowledge highlighted a lack of depth and specificity, with a variable awareness of trans issues.

In setting out key terms, this paper recognise a diversity of genders, and strives not to homogenise or delimit the term 'trans' (Rogers & Ahmed, 2017). For brevity, 'trans' is used as an umbrella term (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Foundation, 2017; Bachmann & Gooch, 2018) to refer to 'anyone who does not feel

CONTACT Claire Brown claire.brown@tees.ac.uk School of Social Sciences, Humanities & Law, Teesside University, Clarendon Building, Middlesbrough TS1 3BX, UK.

comfortable in the gender role they were attributed with at birth, or has a gender identity at odds with the labels "man" or "woman" credited to them by formal authorities' (Whittle, 2006, p. xi). Conceptually, the term cisgenderism is used to describe an ideology comparable to racism and sexism, one that delegitimises trans people's understandings of their genders and bodies (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012, 2014).

The void in research focusing specifically on adoption or fostering by trans people (Hudson-Sharp, 2018; Hudson-Sharp & Metcalf, 2016) can be deemed an issue of equality and justice for trans people, as it is included within the subject of reproductive choice (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Research suggests that trans people hoping to start families wish to do so in a variety of ways, including via birth, surrogacy, adoption and fostering, however many perceive their pathways to parenting to be limited (Riggs et al., 2016; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018; Tasker & Gato, 2020). Notwithstanding, discourse promoting the inclusion of trans people in adoption and fostering practice has increased in recent years, with the publication of guides in the United States (Perry, 2017) and United Kingdom (Brown et al., 2018) for practitioners, and the inclusion of two trans people's narratives within an updated edition of a key lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) adoption and fostering text (Hicks & McDermott, 2018).

An important indication emerging from narrative accounts within the existing literature suggests that due to their own experiences, trans people could be especially well placed to empathise with adopted and fostered young people who have experienced a lack of stability, support, respect and understanding from family members in their early years (Serano, 2016; Smith, 2010). Although primary research has not yet focused on this area, based upon more general research into trans people's experiences (James et al., 2016; White, 2013), it has been argued that trans people may have a number of strengths and skills that are valuable to adoption or fostering (Perry, 2017). These include resilience and resourcefulness, an ability to navigate rejection, an embracing of difference and an optimistic outlook focusing on hope and possibility over limitations.

There has been a silence in relation to the workings of cisgenderism within adoption and fostering social work, with no study to date specifically focusing on this issue (Brown & Rogers, 2020). As a result, little is known about the possible impacts of cisgenderism on potential adoptive parents or foster carers. This study aims to add knowledge to the emerging body of literature, produce recommendations for good practice in adoption and fostering social work and identify directions for further research.

## Methods

This qualitative study was conducted in the United Kingdom and aimed to explore the subjective experiences and perspectives of trans people in relation to the adoption and fostering of children who cannot remain with their birth families. A subset of data was drawn from the author's research to address the following research objectives within this paper:

1. Understand how trans people make sense of their experiences of adoption and fostering through their own narratives of family life.
2. Explore what barriers exist for trans people who wish to adopt and foster in the United Kingdom.

Owing to the exploratory nature of the research objectives and emotive nature of the topic, individual semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate mode of data collection within this narrative inquiry.

### *Participants*

Purposive and snowballing sampling methods were used to recruit participants with a diversity of genders, experiences and attitudes from a hard to access population. To include a range of people, the study was advertised using fliers sent by email to community groups and centres, research networks, and via social media. The eligibility criteria used was 1) being a resident of the United Kingdom, 2) being over 21 years of age, and 3) having adopted/fostered or applied/planned to apply to adopt or foster. Toward the end of

recruitment, emphasis was placed on recruiting participants from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background. The BAME targeted social media and research network advertisement was, however, unsuccessful. One participant was White Welsh, one White American and six White British.

Participants included three trans women aged between 30-72 years old, all with long-term female partners (two of whom were cisgender and one trans). Two participants defined as non-binary, one as neutrois and one as a non-binary trans man. These participants' ages ranged from 25-28 years old, two were single, one was married to a trans woman and one married to a cisgender male. Lastly, was a 49-year-old male with a female partner, who used either cross-dresser or transvestite as a descriptor. Participants resided across urban and rural areas in the United Kingdom and represented a mix of socioeconomic backgrounds. Education levels were high, with most participants having completed further education, two to master's and one to PhD level. Two participants had birth children from previous relationships, two had already adopted and/or fostered children and the rest were interested in adoption or fostering. Other identifying information has been removed to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

### Procedures and data collection

Interested parties were provided with study information and enabled to make an informed choice, with written consent obtained from each. Email or face-to-face interviews were conducted at a venue suited to participant preferences, in adherence with procedures set out in the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee approval.

Interviews were conducted between April 2017 and April 2020 using a topic guide of questions and prompts to stimulate discussion relevant to the research objectives. Sociodemographic data was collected to contextualise participants, inform analysis, and direct further recruitment. Interviews lasted between 30-90 minutes. Verbatim transcription and analysis were undertaken by the researcher, who prioritised participant confidentiality and anonymity by removing identifying information from all transcripts prior to secure storage in accordance with University of Sheffield regulations. Member-checking was undertaken through interviews by summarising information to check accuracy of understanding, and the option to review and edit transcripts was offered to participants.

### Researcher reflexivity

One aspect of ensuring rigor in qualitative research is an appreciation of the part that researchers themselves play in the conducting of research. They form part of the context for interactions with participants, and in doing so bring their own personal identities, qualities, beliefs and meanings to each aspect of the study. It is therefore crucial for the reader to be given information about how the research was conducted. The author is a white British, cisgender woman who was in her early 30 s at the time the interviews were carried out. She has been a qualified Social Worker since 2011 and continues to work in therapeutic social care alongside the lecturing and research role she began in 2019. Any questions participants had about her identity were answered. The researcher had not had previous contact with participants prior to them volunteering to be part of the study.

Reflexivity additionally requires an active noticing along the research process, which was undertaken for this study by recording and referring back to thoughts on the interview process and context, the participant narratives and the relationships created during the interviews.

### Data analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was undertaken in parallel with interviews to examine the subjective experiences of participants. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis guided the process. These included (1) familiarisation with the data by doing multiple transcript readings alongside the audio. (2) Inductive line-by-line coding using NVivo10 to identify nodes, collapse into codes and collate to capture a semantic and conceptual reading of the data. (3) Searching for themes by identifying similarity and relevance.

(4) Reviewing themes by tabularising, checking back, collapsing, splitting and discarding themes so each one reflected the coded extracts and aided the definition of the nature of each theme and its relationship to other themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). (5) Defining and naming themes using a thematic map to help identify what the theme was saying, setting out subthemes and illustrating how they interact to explicate what story the theme tells and how it fits into the overall story about the data. Lastly, the (6) writing up stage involved weaving strands of analytic narrative with illustrative quotes from participant narratives to build up a coherent story about the data.

The approach did not require linearity, rather analysis was undertaken as a recursive process involving constant review and revisiting of each step. Analytical rigour was ensured by engaging in a process of continual evaluation and comparison of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The three primary theoretical paradigms drawn on throughout the analysis are cisgenderism (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012, 2014; Riggs et al., 2015), stigma (Goffman, 1963) and concepts of discourses of power (Foucault, 1969). Throughout the analysis, narratives of assimilation and resistance are interwoven. Parentheses after quotes contain the participant's pseudonym, gender, and interest in adoption or fostering. Contextualisation in relation to existing literature is interwoven to help offer a persuasive and evidentially grounded picture for the reader.

## Results

### *Theme 1: Motivation to adopt or foster*

The choice of adoption or fostering as a pathway to starting a family was affected by participants' trans identities. As found in previous research (Riggs et al., 2015), participants' reasons for choosing adoption or fostering varied, with some selecting it as a first choice of how to start or grow their family, and some coming to it because other options were closed to them. The adoption pathway was chosen by some after fertility problems and loss:

> *Sadly, we had 6 miscarriages… it kept being losses and losses. And she [Alice's partner] was diagnosed with polycystic ovaries quite young… We considered adopting as soon as we had the loss, yeah… Yeah, definitely. It was a case of, so this isn't gonna happen naturally… (Alice, trans woman and prospective adopter)*

Alice's decision was linked to her trans identity, as she and her partner put a time limit on attempts at conceiving through intercourse so that Alice could begin medical treatment for physical transition afterwards:

> *Because I started the hormones, I'm sterile now… and I didn't bother getting anything froze, it was just like nah… there's enough lunatics in the world, I don't have to have that. If we adopt it's gonna be there and thereabouts anyway.*

The consideration of adoption, as tied in with the decision regarding when to medically transition, appears to have changed Alice and her partner's desire to have a birth child, as they accepted that it may not happen, and gave thought to adoption as an alternative.

Andie describes how becoming a foster carer and then adopting was influenced by her age, as linked to the relationship challenges that she had experienced in earlier life because of her gender:

> *I lived life in turmoil and had chosen to keep myself single. I was 37 when Sophia and I got together. We did try in a natural way for a short while but put it down to age as to why nothing was happening. We thought it was too late to try and have children, so we decided to adopt and further decided we could make good foster carers. (Andie, trans woman, foster carer and adopter)*

Noel explains the impact of transphobia on his wish to adopt:

> *Internalised transphobia carried over to not feeling I would be able to do a lot of things. What would be the reaction of my partner, what would be the reaction of our child? (Noel, cross dresser/transvestite and prospective adopter)*

It is put forward that the decision to adopt or foster could be influenced by earlier experiences of transphobia, where stigma based on cisgenderist views have been internalised and affect what opportunities an individual then believes will be afforded to them (Goffman, 1963). Discrimination and marginalisation may cause prohibitive worries regarding other people's reactions to oneself as a

trans person. Here, cisgenderism has arguably acted to reduce not the motivation to adopt, but the belief in one's ability to adopt (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). In this way, it can be suggested that cisgenderism acts oppressively within adoption and fostering social care spheres in a similar manner to health services (Pearce, 2018), preventing trans carers from gaining full access to their desired family life (Goffman, 1963).

### Theme 2: Perceived institutional barriers to pursuing adoption or fostering

The narratives suggested that participants believed numerous institutional barriers existed that would prevent them from starting or growing their family via adoption or fostering:

> *I was never really up for it in the early years, you know, I thought, I had the sort of stigma in my head that I thought that trans people don't have kids.*
>
> *(Alice, trans woman and prospective adopter)*

Stigma has again been internalised and has influenced the imagined possibilities that Alice had for her life (Goffman, 1963). Cisgenderism exerts influence, from the individual practices of human interactions through to the establishment of organisations, and this extends to the procedures adopted by institutions (Bauer et al., 2009). Taking a broad sociological examination of the impact of cisgenderism, then, it can be argued that it has shaped the social context of the country. Cisgenderism is not only embedded within societal structures it also operates at an individual level to affect perceptions of trans as being a barrier to becoming a parent. As such, the macro level structural influence of cisgenderism (embedded within culture and institutions) can be linked to cisgenderism that operates at a micro level, reducing individual choice and agency.

Participants expressed the belief that it would be more difficult for a person whose presentation is genderqueer (not in-keeping with conventional binary gender distinctions) to adopt than someone whose gender is binary:

> *I think they'd really struggle… I was asked to speak at a IDAHOBIT event… the theme was 'love makes a family'… and I had a really tough time with that speech, because I wanted to be honest, I wanted to be truthful, but also… I didn't want to put off other trans people from applying … so I talked about some of the experiences that I'd had, erm, but I made sure that I really leaned heavily on the positive ones. (Celyn, non-binary adopter)*

In examining why social work organisations may struggle with the idea of an trans person applying to adopt or foster, participants proposed that such reticence may come from a belief that placing a child with a trans person can influence the child's gender:

> *There is the assumption as well that if you are trans, that will rub off on your child, and that came from that environment there. (Ash, neutrois prospective adopter)*

Another barrier reported was a worry about unwanted attention that could be attracted by the British media because either a parent/carer or child is trans:

> *There's a genuine fear that I have is that the Daily Mail find out about us, they'll have a ball! They can never, they never can. (Celyn, non-binary adopter)*

In a context where trans people routinely experience discrimination and its harmful effects (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018; LGBTF, 2017; Riggs & Treharne, 2017), the threat of further negative exposure for oneself and one's child could put up a significant barrier to adoption and fostering. Indeed, minority stigma stress, mental illness and isolation, are known to be experienced by people following exposure to discrimination (Meyer, 2003; Riggs & Treharne, 2017).

### Theme 3: Experiences of cisgenderism in assessment

Several interviewees expressed concern that there would be an over-focus on gender, to the detriment of other characteristics and facets of life:

> *It's interesting… it's a part of me, it's an important part of me, I won't downplay it. But… it's not the most… I would expect… asking about… how does your experience as a trans person inform your parenting?… Coz I would be like, yeah, it has, absolutely… I'm happy to tell you that… the impact of growing up, like not being accepted, has… formed my ideas about… what's kind of… important in raising a child… That's a great question… but then*

*also, ask us other questions, like stuff about our interests and our jobs and you know, home life and that kind of thing. (Jamie, non-binary prospective adopter)*

An unwarranted over-focus on gender throughout assessment and placement indicates a further form of cisgenderism present within adoption and fostering processes. Cisgenderism was found to operate at different levels, including both individual and systemic acts, which can be unintentional or intentional (Riggs et al., 2015):

*When you meet someone, the first thing you do subconsciously is decide whether they're male or female… we speak to them differently, we treat them differently, depending on what your brain has decided. And it's all completely subconscious. (Sarah-Jane, trans woman interested in adoption)*

Cisgenderism can be present in the personal views of a social worker, however it is also considered to have systemic traits and can be seen as a wider structural problem in society (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012, 2014; Rogers, 2017a; Rogers & Ahmed, 2017). Trans people do not yet benefit from the full range of options afforded to cisgender people (e.g., becoming adopters or carers) because services and the public fail to understand and meet their needs (Davis, 2018), as the following participants suggest:

*We had a bad experience with one of our supervising social workers, which left us suspicious of the fostering team, we decided not to inform them of my decision to transition at first, mainly because I knew it was a long journey. Unfortunately our 3 yearly medical reviews had to be done. Once again, my medical records betrayed me. (Andie, trans woman, foster carer and adopter)*

*I've been meeting other trans people and they all have experienced some level of hate (trans women being the most discriminated against)… I was once groped by someone who wanted to know if I was wearing a prosthetic in my underwear… In terms of Facebook, prejudice and hatred towards trans people is everywhere!… Yes more people are feeling safe to express their true gender identity, but hate crimes are on the rise again because of this (Toby, non-binary trans man and prospective foster carer)*

Different forms of cisgenderism were found to operate; at the micro level misgendering (inaccurate use of gendered language) and negative reactions from individual workers, and at the macro level the pathologising of, and hatred toward, trans people (Shelton, 2015). As an orienting framework, cisgenderism broadens the analysis of the discrimination experienced by adopters and foster carers, from a focus at the micro level of interpersonal interactions to include macro level institutional structures (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). Such macro level structures can be said to both produce and maintain the effects of marginalisation of trans people within adoption and fostering services, as well as society at large.

### Theme 4: Experiences of cisgenderism after placement

There were examples of agencies exerting restrictions on children's clothing and services that could promote exploration of their own gender:

*I'm not allowed to take her to [group for trans youths] because they're… 'too gender-affirming'… they have made a referral to the gender identity clinic for her, to be seen… because, the gender clinic takes a very very long time and it's very very very cautious. And erm, will, actively slow her making a transition…*

*[Evie's foster carer] was very supportive of Evie, but just little things… Evie was allowed to have one pair of boxers, that she was allowed to wear on weekends only, and her carer called them her 'silly pants'… I was like they're just boxers, she can wear them whenever she wants… and like don't make a big deal out of it, they're just pants. (Celyn, non-binary adopter)*

Other examples demonstrated that tasks usually given to adoptive parents in delegated parental responsibility from placement were restricted because they were related to a child's gender identity exploration:

*Evie's been asking to have her hair cut… They were micro-managing everything to the nth degree… talking about a child's gender or sexual orientation, is quite scary for social workers, erm, for fear of are they gonna get it wrong? Are they gonna end up on the front page of the daily mail?… I think they all reverted to sort of what safe or normal for them. (Celyn, non-binary adopter)*

Workers involved in the child's part of the adoption process also struggled to know how to talk about and how much attention to give gender:

*Matthew, the psychiatrist is, he was really reluctant to have anything in her [Evie's] profile about the fact that*

*she was questioning her gender… Because he was worried about attracting someone who thought it was really trendy and cool. (Celyn, non-binary adopter)*

Embedded gender norms in society have resulted in the dominant discourse of gender normativity and cisgenderism being internalised by individuals (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). Although overt discrimination can be challenged under legislation such as the United Kingdom Equality Act, 2010, covert discrimination can be more pervasive and difficult to address (Ely, 1995).

Cisgenderism was also been highlighted in the school environment. In early placement, Celyn's child Evie asked to bring in a book about gender to share with her class and this request was denied:

*The virtual school told them not to allow it. It's a banned book on the curriculum… In key stage 2 they talk about girls' bodies and boys, the difference between girls and boys, so they don't talk about anything more complicated than that. Or anything beyond that… And so, we kind of had a really frustrating time where the school are willing and I kind of know what's happening… and the virtual school are saying 'you can't'. (Celyn, non-binary adopter)*

As exemplified above, there were difficulties in enacting overt methods of resistance against cisgenderist views and actions of social work, psychology or teaching professionals at the point where a child was placed for adoption but not yet officially adopted. The placing authority retains the majority share of parental responsibility and chooses how and when to share this with the adoptive parent; as such they have legal power over decision-making that cannot be disputed. However, there were still examples of small acts of resistance, such as the use of humour:

*So, I just mentioned that she was still asking to have her hair cut, so I was gona take her to the… and I sort of mentioned that she wanted to have a Mohican, as a joke! And they came back and said, 'she's allowed to have her hair cut, but she's not allowed to have a Mohican!' (Celyn, non-binary adopter)*

Modes of resistance can act to challenge normative thoughts, discourses and social presentations, acting to exert resistance against assimilation and to give voice to new social ways of being. Each time carers and social workers speak about trans people, modes of resistance are created and operationalised as new objects are mentioned, and their relations of similarity difference spoken about (Foucault, 1969). Existing powerful and dominant discourses seek to hinder the development of new counter-narratives:

*And I think it comes from genuine concerns of what will, like, I had, I have a friend who is trans and who is raising her children with 'they' pronouns, and social services escalated her… Because they said it was depersonalising for the child. And not allowing the child to have an appropriate gender, and that sort of thing… Well, eventually they were left alone, but they had to justify themselves quite a lot. (Ash, neutrois prospective adopter)*

Within a normative ideological conception of gender, social workers positioned cisgender people as natural and indisputable, with gender identity viewed as being absolute and fixed at birth. Due to the influence of gender normativity in society, being cisgender can be viewed as usual and acceptable, and transgender people as unnatural, deviant or other (Enke, 2012). Social workers appeared to reduce the adopter's experience of gender to their physical presentation and a set of socially dictated characteristics (Serano, 2016), and in so doing closed off possibilities for self-definition (Pearce, 2018; Whittle, 2006). However, as counter-narratives are given voice, their complex relations begin to emerge as a new discourse.

Counter-narratives voiced by participants sought to challenge the dominant cisgenderist discourse and offer alternative explanations as to how gender works and is presented. The novelty and expansion of ways of thinking may, however, create anxiety for social workers:

*At [the local authority where placed Evie for adoption] my non-binary-ness was sort of considered and there were lots of… it was part of the reason why they matched me with Evie. But also… but they still sort of had their own anxieties about it, so for example, they said that I had to be called Celyn, I couldn't be called anything else… [they wanted to be called] 'Mum-dad'; it's a welsh word that means parent… I'm Welsh. I'm not just sort of plucking it out of the air! (Celyn, non-binary adopter)*

Trans feminist discourses and those of non-binary genders enable us to acknowledge the possibility of a world that does not have to be divided simplistically by rigid ideas of binary sex and gender (Bornstein & Bergman, 2010). These

discourses draw attention to the complexity and diversity that exists within biological, social and political life and add new dimensions to processes of matching and placing children for adoption.

### Theme 5: Positive experiences and recommendations

Factors in trans people's choice of foster care of adoption agency to apply with centered on the experience it had in supporting LGBT parents. However, some participants highlighted that support of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people specifically did not necessarily also mean the agency would be able or willing to support trans people:

> *There are some agencies that are really active in looking for LGBT parents, but the T is kind of contentious for a lot of them. Like, they're happy for a lesbian couple to adopt a baby but would be more wary of a trans couple. And I think that's, that's a societal thing. (Ash, neutrois prospective adopter)*

Indeed, previous research has suggested that interest in and therefore support for lesbian and gay-headed families may have obscured the ongoing neglect of the most marginalised voices, because trans people are subsumed into 'LGBT' research (Rogers, 2016; Rogers & Ahmed, 2017; Ross & Dobinson, 2013). Trans participants all stated that it would be helpful for agencies to clearly express an openness to and valuing of trans people:

> *Having the fostering/adoption service promote that it welcomed/needed non-binary families would be a huge encouragement (Noel, cross dresser/transvestite, prospective adopter)*

For participants who engaged with social workers who had previous experience supporting trans people, the experience was positive:

> *With a new supervising social worker and a change in the fostering manager… this was very positive as our new social worker was brilliant, she had some experience with transgender issues and was able to offer us some real support. (Andie, trans woman, adopter and foster carer)*

Other participants, however, searched for agencies who had experience of trans adopters, and found a lack of experience in supporting trans adopters and carers:

> *I got the impression that we don't have a single trans foster carer on our books (Toby, non-binary trans man and prospective carer)*

Some prospective adopters/carers outlined relevant experience that they believed could add strength to their applications to adopt or foster:

> *We've taken in one of our friends who's got a kid, so… she's lived with us for a little while, just at weekends… so there's a six year-old lad, and this young baby girl, so… relevant experience all round there! (Alice, trans woman and prospective adopter)*

There were also examples of how trans people succeeded as both adopters and foster carers:

> *We had a 16-year-old boy on an emergency placement, whose behaviour was very challenging, but never displayed any transphobic behaviour towards me. He came from an adoption break down the mother also showed no negativity towards me… Our present placement is a 5-year-old boy who has settled into our family extremely well, I would say total acceptance of me. (Andie, trans woman, foster carer and adopter)*

> *I would say that children in my life… I've spoken to them and I'm not a boy or a girl, and they should call me 'they'… and that because they're kids and everything they're learning, they're learning, they're not sort of having to re-learn, so they just incorporate it into their worldview in a way that grown-ups don't… So, I told them about Robby that I mentioned, who is my god child, who, one day, he was telling his grandma about a day out that we'd had. And erm, grandma asked 'is Celyn a boy or a girl? And he went 'neither, they're just normal'. (Celyn, non-binary adopter)*

In-line with Hudson-Sharp's (2018) previous findings, training was seen to be key. Participants recommended that social workers, families and teachers make use of resources for such as '*A kids' guide to gender*' that can help children understand both their parent's gender and their own:

> *A picture book that explains gender to kids… there's a wheel at the back where you can talk about 'I have a body… there's girl/boy/neither'… I think there are maybe 12 or 13 different options… then the outside ring is sort of 'I like' and there's loads of different types of clothes… and activities and games… It's really really great. And Evie wanted to bring it into school. (Celyn, non-binary adopter)*

Another unanimous recommendation was that social work agencies listening to trans people with experience of adoption and fostering is key to the improvement of inclusivity and support. It

is argued that greater equality can be achieved by improving collaborative working with people who are trans or non-binary to understand their personal and social situations from a value perspective most relevant to conducting effective assessment, planning, intervention, and review (Smith, 2018). Practice guidance may also be utilized by practitioners to assist implementation of the practicalities that promote an inclusive and collaborative approach in fostering and adoption (Brown et al., 2018).

## Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that cisgenderism can impact upon the adoption and fostering process for trans people. Non-binary individuals in particular reported feeling disproportionately disadvantaged by other people's perceptions about their gender. People whose genders and gender presentations did not fit with binary cisgenderist expectations largely felt excluded and that their needs were not provided for by services. As such, it is argued that a lack of understanding and support for non-binary people creates barriers to adoption and fostering.

This study has demonstrated how cisgenderism as a framework can help in the process of analyzing the narratives of trans people in relation to adoption and fostering services in the United Kingdom. As advocated in practice guidance (Brown et. al, 2018), the findings of this study stress the importance of working with trans people using a lens of cisgenderism. In focusing on the ways in which trans people's self-understanding can be discounted or challenged by individuals and systems, the analysis of cisgenderism can aid social care at a macro level, by improving understanding of trans peoples' experiences. It is argued that this could better equip social workers to understand external obstacles presented by individuals and institutions, to see trans people's strengths, to challenge false beliefs, and to bring concerns into a conscious, open dialogue to be addressed collectively (Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015).

At a more micro level, practical suggestions to improve inclusivity of facilities and procedures were offered. Visibly showing that trans people are valued alongside LGB people is essential from the point of advertisement through assessment to support. This can be done by using representative imagery and updating forms, and resources and training to utilise inclusive language that avoids gender-specific nouns and titles.

Adoption and fostering services should work to remove gender barriers both in the interests of children needing homes, and adults whose preference or fertility experiences bring them to adoption and fostering. It is highlighted that increased understanding must also extend beyond adoption and fostering staff, to those working in placing authorities as children's social workers, as well as panel members.

This exploratory study highlights the need for further research on a larger scale to develop an understanding of how variance in the experiences of gender diverse individuals influence the impact that cisgenderism can have. Research about trans people adopting and fostering is crucial for understanding the context of cisgenderism in this area of social care. Specifically, with the intention of improving outcomes for trans people hoping to adopt and foster, and as such also for children needing homes, research is needed to develop and test ways in which services can become more inclusive and understanding of gender diversity.

## Limitations

A limitation of this research was that the sample lacked breadth for certain sociodemographic features, particularly ethnicity. Minority ethnic backgrounds are frequently underrepresented in research (Rooney et al., 2011), and while effort was made to recruit participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, this was unsuccessful. Moreover, though a wide definition of 'trans' was used (to include all those whose gender differs from that imparted upon them by formal authorities), due to a modest sample size the experiences captured represent those of a relatively small subset of a wide range of experiences, gender and modes of gender expression. It will be important to try to address this in future research to increase transferability.

## Conclusion

This study shows that cisgenderism influences adoption and fostering within the United Kingdom, creating multiple barriers for trans and non-binary people. A key strength of this research is the novelty of perspective. The study offers a distinct, original contribution to the research base by directly accessing the experiences of trans people. It is the first paper to focus specifically on trans people's experiences of adoption and fostering. This is vital to advance our understanding of the wider context and implications of cisgenderism in United Kingdom social care services.

The research highlights how cisgenderist views can impact on trans people's decisions and abilities to move through the assessment, matching, and support processes involved in adoption and fostering. Findings from this study indicate that the impact of cisgenderism could be especially prohibitive for non-binary individuals due to the prevalence of traditional gender norms within adoption and fostering services. In order to reduce the impact of gender barriers preventing trans adopting and fostering, it is suggested that agencies need to address embedded cisgenderist views and processes to become more inclusive of those families who do not fit traditional and binary gender norms.

This research adds to a growing conversation that seeks to help us understand trans people's narratives of family and relates this specifically to adoption and fostering. Its practical and policy implications point to the need to undertake further research to understand and legitimise the needs of trans people in various social care settings. To meet the ultimate need of providing greater permanency solutions for children who need them, it is argued that trans inclusive social care provision is an important goal for adoption and fostering services to work toward.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual parties included in the study.

## Funding

No funding was provided for this study and there are no competing or conflicting interests to declare.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge and thank all the participants who took part in this research, as well as her PhD supervisor Dr Michaela Rogers.

## References

Ansara, Y. G., & Hegarty, P. (2012). Cisgenderism in psychology: Pathologising and misgendering children from 1999 to 2008. *Psychology and Sexuality*, *3*(2), 137–160. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2011.576696

Ansara, Y. P., & Hegarty, P. (2014). Methodologies of misgendering: Recommendations for reducing cisgenderism in psychological research. *Feminism & Psychology*, *24*(2), 259–270. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353514526217

Bachmann, C. L., & Gooch, B. (2018). *LGBT in Britain: Trans report*. Stonewall. Retrieved October 12, 2020, from https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/lgbt_in_britain_-_trans_report_final.pdf

Bauer, G. R., Hammond, R., Travers, R., Kaay, M., Hohenadel, K. M., & Boyce, M. (2009). "I don't think this is theoretical; this is our lives": How erasure impacts health care for transgender people. *The Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care : JANAC*, *20*(5), 348–361. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jana.2009.07.004

Bornstein, K., & Bergman, S. B. (2010). *Gender outlaws: The next generation*. Seal Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: Sage.

Brown, C., Andrew, C., & Adams, P. (2018). *Practise Note 69: Assessing and supporting transgender foster carers and adopters*. Coram BAAF. Retrieved October 12, 2020, from https://corambaaf.org.uk/books/practice-note-69-assessing-and-supporting-transgender-foster-carers-and-adopters

Brown, C., & Rogers, M. (2020). Removing gender barriers: Promoting inclusion for trans and non-binary carers in fostering and adoption. *Child & Family Social Work*, *25*(3), 594–598. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12731

Cosis-Brown, H., Sebba, J., & Luke, N. (2015). *The recruitment, assessment, support and supervision of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender foster carers: An international literature review*. Rees Centre for Research in Fostering

and Education. Retrieved October 12, 2020, from https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/basw_102603-4_0.pdf

Davis, H. F. (2018). *Beyond trans: Does gender matter?* NYU Press.

Ely, R. J. (1995). The power in demography: Women's social constructions of gender identity at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, *38*, 589–634. https://doi.org/10.5465/256740

Enke, A. (2012). *Transfeminist perspectives in and beyond transgender and gender studies*. Temple University Press.

First4adoption. (2017). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) and thinking about adoption?* Retrieved October 12, 2020, from https://www.first4adoption.org.uk/who-can-adopt-a-child/how-do-i-decide/thinking-about-adoption-lgbt/.

Foucault, M. (1969). *Archaeology of knowledge*. Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma; Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Simon & Schuster Inc.

Golombok, S., Mellish, L., Jennings, S., Casey, P., Tasker, F., & Lamb, M. (2014). Adoptive gay father families: Parent-child relationships and children's psychological adjustment . *Child Development*, *85*(2), 456–468. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12155

Hicks, S., & McDermott, J. (2018). *Lesbian and gay foster care and adoption* (2nd ed.). Jessica Kingsley.

Hudson-Sharp, N. (2018). *Transgender awareness in child and family social work education*. NIESR. Retrieved October 12, 2020, from https://www.niesr.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Transgender_awareness_in_child_and_family_social_work_education.pdf

Hudson-Sharp, N., & Metcalf, H. (2016). *Inequality among lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender groups in the UK: A review of evidence*. NIESR. Retrieved October 12, 2020, from https://www.niesr.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publications/160719_REPORT_LGBT_evidence_review_NIESR_FINALPDF.pdf.

James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, National Center for Transgender Equality*. Retrieved October 12, 2020, from https://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/USTS-Full-Report-FINAL.PDF.

Legislation.gov.uk. (2010). *Equality Act 2010*. Retrieved October 12, 2020, from http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

LGBT Foundation. (2017). *Transforming outcomes: A review of the needs and assets of the trans community*. Retrieved October 12, 2020, from https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/LGBT-media/Files/acd2bcc5-a2d4-4203-8e22-aed9f4843921/TransformingOutcomesLGBTFdn.pdf.

Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *8*(3), 3351–3354.

Meyer, H. I. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, *129*(5), 674–697. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674

Morgaine, K., & Capous-Desyllas, M. (2015). *Anti-oppressive social work practice: Putting theory into.* Sage Publications.

Pearce, R. (2018). *Understanding trans health: Discourse, power and possibility*. Policy Press.

Perry, J. R. (2017). *Promoting practices for serving transgender & non-binary foster & adoptive parents*. Human Rights Campaign Foundation. Retrieved October 12, 2020, from https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/HRC_ACAF_Promising_Practices_Serving_Transgender_Non-Binary_Parents.pdf

Riggs, D. W., & Bartholomaeus, C. (2018). Fertility preservation decision making amongst Australian transgender and non-binary adults. *Reproductive Health*, *5*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-018-0627-z

Riggs, D. W., & Treharne, G. H. (2017). Decompensation: A novel approach to accounting for stress arising from the effects of ideology and social norms. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *64*(5), 592–605. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1194116

Riggs, D. W., Ansara, Y. G., & Treharne, G. J. (2015). An evidence-based model for understanding transgender mental health in Australia. *Australian Psychologist*, *50*(1), 32–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12088

Riggs, D. W., Power, J., & von Doussa, H. (2016). Parenting and Australian trans and gender diverse people: An exploratory survey. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, *17*(2), 59–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2016.1149539

Rogers, M. (2016). Breaking down barriers: Exploring the potential for social care practice with trans survivors of domestic abuse. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, *24*(1), 68–76. https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12193

Rogers, M. (2017a). The intersection of cisgenderism and hate crime: Learning from trans people's narratives. *Journal of Family Strengths*, *17*(2), 1–28. Retrieved October 12, 2020, from http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol17/iss2/5

Rogers, M. (2017b). Challenging cisgenderism through trans people's narratives of domestic violence and abuse. *Sexualities*, *22*(5–6), 803–820. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716681475

Rogers, M., & Ahmed, A. (2017). Interrogating trans and sexual identities through the conceptual lens of translocational positionality. *Sociological Research Online*, *22*(1), 81–94. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.4169

Rooney, L. K., Bhopal, R., Halani, L., Levy, M. L., Partridge, M. R., Netuveli, G., Car, J., Griffiths, C., Atkinson, J., Lindsay, G., & Sheikh, A. (2011). Promoting recruitment of minority ethnic groups into research: Qualitative study exploring the views of South Asian people with asthma. *Journal of Public Health (Oxford, England))*, *33*(4), 604–615. https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdq100

Ross, L. E., & Dobinson, C. (2013). Where is the "B" in LGBT parenting? A call for research on bisexual

parenting. In A. E. Goldberg & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *LGBT-parent families: Innovations in research and implications for practice* (pp. 87–104). Springer.

Serano, J. (2016). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity* (2nd ed.). Seal Press.

Shelton, J. (2015). Transgender youth homelessness: Understanding programmatic barriers through the lens of cisgenderism. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *59*, 10–18. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.10.006

Smith, G. A. (2010). We're all someone's freak. In K. Bornstein & S. B. Bergman (Eds.), *Gender outlaws: The next generation* (pp. 26–30). Seal Press.

Smith, R. (2018). Reconsidering value perspectives in child welfare. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *48*(3), 616–632. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx067

Tasker, F., & Gato, J. (2020). Gender identity and future thinking about parenthood: A qualitative analysis of focus group data with transgender and non-binary people in the United Kingdom. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 865. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00865

White, M. (2013). *Resiliency factors among transgender people of color* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Whittle, S. (2006). Foreword. In S. Stryker & S. Whittle (Eds.), *The transgender studies reader* (pp. xi–xvi). Routledge.